

MALE DANCERS OF SABAR—STARS OF A FEMALE TRADITION

by

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Abstract. This article discusses the role of male dancers within the Senegalese *sabar* tradition. The most common context for *sabar* dancing is social dance events that are dominated by non-professional female dancers. However, since the independence of Senegal in 1960 *sabar* dancing has also been developed as a stage art in folkloric dance companies known as ballets in West Africa. Later *sabar* also began to be performed by dancers and dance groups on stage with *mbalax* bands. Both of these newer forms of *sabar* dancing take the form of pre-planned choreographies performed by both male and female dancers; but, many of the best known *sabar* dancers today are men. Developments caused by the professionalisation of *sabar* dancing and analyses of the changes that have occurred in the style of dancing to emphasise the masculinity of the male dancers as opposed to the ideas of femininity traditionally attached to *sabar* dancing are discussed.

Introduction

Sabar is the traditional style of dancing and drumming of the Wolof people who live in the western-most parts of the Sahel in West Africa, mostly in Senegal. The word *sabar* is a generic term referring to the drums played by the Wolof *gëwël* (griots) and the rhythms played on these drums as well as the dances associated with the different rhythms. The same term is sometimes used for events where improvised *sabar* dancing is the primary form of entertainment. After presenting the *sabar* as practiced in such social dance events, I will turn to professional performances of *sabar* dances; specifically, two newer forms of *sabar* dancing both of which mainly take place on stage: choreographed versions of *sabar* dances by folkloric dance companies known as ballets in Francophone West Africa, and dancing connected to *mbalax*, the most popular genre of Senegalese pop music.

What makes these professional performances significant for present day development of the *sabar* tradition is that they affect the scenes of social dancing in several ways. The professional dance performances of ballets typically strive towards an authentic representation of tradition (see Castaldi 2006: 63, 155) and therefore represent an ideal form of what *sabar* dances should look like, which can be seen to influence the aesthetics of social *sabar* dancing as well. Similarly, movement sequences created for *mbalax* video clips are regularly adopted into the social dance repertoire, although most of them are retained only for a short period of time. Also, professional dancers from ballets and dance groups performing with *mbalax* bands are sometimes invited to perform at *sabar* events, where their choreographed performances contrast with the usual social dynamics of the events.

However, possibly the most significant change in these new professional forms of *sabar* dancing is that they are performed by both male and female dancers, whereas the social *sabar* dance events were previously the quasi-exclusive domain of women. Furthermore, presently many of the best-known professional *sabar* dancers in Senegal are men. In this article, I focus on the role of the male *sabar* dancers as performers of what is typically considered a female tradition and explore the following questions: how do male dancers convey the *sabar* tradition in their performances? Have interpretations of the *sabar* tradition by male dancers introduced changes to *sabar* dancing, and if so, what kind of changes? And finally, how is masculinity expressed in their dancing, particularly in their reconstructions of the *sabar* tradition?

I approach the topic from the theoretical premises of performance studies where gender is seen as performatively constructed in social interactions (e.g. Shay and Fisher 2009: 10; Butler 1999: 33, 43; also Goffman 1959). As Ramsay Burt (2009: 150) states: "Dance is an area through which, as embodied beings, we negotiate the social and cultural discourses through which gender and sexuality are maintained." *Sabar* dancing as a social activity of women and its significance in performative negotiations of femininity has been discussed by several authors (Neveu Kringelbach 2007 and 2013; Castaldi 2006: 70–101; Morales-Libove 2005; Penna-Diaw 2005; Heath 1994),¹ whereas the position of male dancers within the *sabar* tradition has been largely left unexplored apart from my own doctoral dissertation (Seye 2014), where it is briefly touched upon.

My dissertation fieldwork conducted in Senegal, mostly in Dakar, the most significant part of which took place from December 2005 to July 2006 is the basis of what follows. I also made several shorter trips to Senegal since 2000 and have been working with Senegalese dancers and musicians residing in Finland and elsewhere in Europe over the years, e.g. some of my interviews have been conducted in Finland when Senegalese dancers have been teaching workshops here. Some of my collaborators are mentioned by name when referring to interviews with them, but as often is the case, much information and understanding has been accumulated through informal discussions, as well as on a more practical level during dance and drumming lessons and dance events.²

The female space of social dance events

Sabar dancing can be connected with practically any festive occasion or social gathering, from weddings to political rallies: it is probably still the most common form of entertainment even in urban Senegal, unless one counts in the entertainment provided by TV and radio. The most common *sabar* event is a small dance party held in the afternoon or early evening, before sunset, and consequently called *sabaru ngoon* ('afternoon *sabar*'). A *sabaru ngoon* usually lasts for an hour or two and is organized by

¹ I thank one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for pointing me to the dissertation of Morales-Libove (2005), which is particularly interesting in its consideration of femininity.

² I particularly want to thank my main teachers during the fieldwork period of 2005–06, dancers Astou Faye and Pape Moussa Sonko and percussionists Cherif "Dupin" Cissokho and Yirime Gueye.

a small group of women, often friends, neighbors or colleagues. The other main kind of *sabar* dance event is a *tànnëbéér*, a bigger nighttime celebration of longer duration (up to four hours) that may include professional performances of music, dance, acrobatics etc. in addition to improvised social dancing by the participants. Dancing related to life-cycle celebrations usually take the form of a *sabaru ngoon*.

Mainly women engage in any kind of *sabar* event, both as dancers and as spectators, and therefore *sabar* events and dancing are generally perceived as ‘women’s business’—*afeeru jigéen* (see also Heath 1994: 92; Neveu Kringelbach 2013: 86). If men are present, as often is the case in life-cycle celebrations, they usually stay behind the women and children gathered around the dance space and talk amongst themselves, apparently uninterested in the dancing. In principle, everyone present can participate in dancing, but in practice young women are the most active dancers. Children, both girls and boys, who certainly would be eager to participate, are usually shooed away from the dance space before the dancing starts. Women tend to dance less and less as they get older, and many older women dance only at family events, such as name-giving and wedding celebrations. Young men might dance at small events where no elders are present, but more mature men generally do not dance, regardless of the occasion.

The participation in dancing clearly reflects Wolof ideas of social status. All kinds of public performance historically falls into the domain of expertise of the *gëwël* (griot) caste, an endogamous group of oral historians and performers within Wolof society that is until today considered of inferior social status.³ Consequently, dancing at *sabar* events, especially those that take place in a public space, can be interpreted as an indication of low social status (see Irvine 1978: 657, 670). Besides family lineage, social status among the Wolof is defined by gender and age (Diop 1981: 8; Heath 1994: 92), and therefore it is no wonder that young women are the most active dancers and that men outside the *gëwël* caste very rarely dance after reaching adulthood. In many smaller *sabar* events the seven to ten drummers are the only male participants. Due to their *gëwël* status and their role as professional performers these drummers are not expected to conform to the usual norms of behavior.

Refraining from dancing can thus be a performative act that expresses the superior social status of a person. But, especially for young women, dancing provides an opportunity to present themselves in front of others and to construct their identities as “good women”. I have claimed elsewhere (Seye 2012, 2014: 114–116) that *sabar* dancing actually promotes a very conventional view of femininity. Among the Wolof public performance is viewed as an indication of low status, but also as a service rendered to others; thus, the low social status of young women is further underscored by their active engagement in dancing, but simultaneously their dancing can be interpreted positively as an expression of solidarity towards the organizer/s of the event (see also Heath 1994: 93). Also, the ideal of *sañse*, a concern for elegance that includes dressing up

³ For a discussion of Wolof social structure and the *gëwël* caste in particular, as well as *gëwël* percussionists in Senegal, see Tang 2007: 47–95. For a presentation of the traditional activities of the *gëwël* and a discussion of their contemporary livelihoods, see Panzacchi 1994.

for important occasions, is a visible feature of *sabar* dance events (Neveu Kringelbach 2013: 87–89; Morales-Libove 2005: 90; Heath 1992). Dancing in front of others is a place to show off one's beauty and sense of style, even to give one's peers a glimpse of the clothing and accessories that remain hidden in everyday situations. In the words of Jennifer Morales-Libove:

Although women behaved in socially “unacceptable” (*yewul*) ways at *tours*, the specific attention paid there to proper fashion and outer presentation illustrates once again the ways that public standards of respectability and women's sexuality penetrated even the most intimate female locales. (2005: 112)

Of course, dance events also provide an occasion for women to forget their daily chores and have fun with their friends. Several researchers (Castaldi 2006: 70–101, Heath 1994, Neveu Kringelbach 2007, Penna-Diaw 2005, Tang 2007: 128, 134–135) have interpreted these events as empowering for women because women take charge both as organizers and as dancers, make themselves the center of attention and ignore some everyday codes of conduct with dance movements that reveal their underskirts and thighs, and in some cases women choose to flash even more by lifting up their skirts. Morales-Libove (2005: 118) similarly describes the *tuur* (or *tour* in French spelling), women's association meetings that take the form of a *sabaru ngoon* but in a more private⁴ setting, as separate spaces where women were allowed to “misbehave”, to express themselves in ways that in other social spaces would not be acceptable. According to her, the dancing at *tuur* provides a space where women can negotiate and contest hegemonic gender relations and dominant beliefs about sexuality (Morales-Libove 2005: ii–iii).

Although breaking the rules of everyday life is certainly an aspect of *sabar* dance events, it must be remembered that this apparent female empowerment occurs within the particular framework of the dance event and there is a male presence, at least by the *gëwël* drummers, and often by accidental passers by, because most *sabar* events in Dakar take place on the street. It is thus easy to agree with Morales-Libove's (2005: 217) conclusion that through dancing at *tuur* or any other *sabar* dance events women learn to “dance the fine line between conformity to, or open flaunting of, popular standards of morality”, and—I would add—to recognize the limits of appropriate behavior in different social situations. Due to the foregoing reasons, I argue that *sabar* dancing ultimately promotes a widely accepted Wolof ideal of a “good woman”, which is a conventional view of femininity, rather than presenting a space of empowerment in the sense of proposing an actual threat to the prevailing patriarchal social structures. Although restraint and self-control is valued in Wolof culture, women are not expected to be passive in their actions or too modest in their appearance. Rather, any respectable person is expected to act with self-confidence and determination, and women particularly are expected to show hospitality and solidarity towards others in addition to embodying the above-mentioned ideal of having *sañse*, which certainly refers to being not only elegantly

⁴ See Morales-Libove 2005: 107.

dressed but also attractive in the eyes of men (see Morales-Libove 2005: 162, 187–188 *et passim*; also Neveu Kringelbach 2013: 87–88).

Sabar dancing as embodiment of femininity

A further justification for my conclusion that sabar dancing rather embodies widely accepted ideals of femininity than challenges them can be found in the dynamic relationship of *sabar* dance and music, where a certain respect for tradition is the prerequisite for a good and enjoyable (*neex*) dance solo, and the same kind of basic respect for tradition is expected of women in their daily lives, as well.

An essential trait of *sabar* dancing is its close interaction with the music. The group of drummers provides the accompaniment for the dance and the dancer must adhere to the specific dance rhythm being played. However, the dance movements do not follow the music in a strict sense but rather add new rhythm patterns to the polyrhythmic texture of the drum ensemble. These patterns are “played out” by the drum soloist who is supposed to follow the movements of a dancer with his playing; this implies that he actually has to anticipate the dancer’s movements in order to play them out as the dancer is dancing. Thus, the dancer becomes, with the musical mediation by the drum soloist, the leader of the group of drummers for the duration of her solo. This requires the dancer to dance in a clear and determined manner, using established movement patterns associated with the dance rhythm in question rather than improvising freely; or in short, to respect tradition as both dancers and musicians typically express it. I was told by one of the drummers I interviewed that

[t]he most important thing is to know the tradition. Sometimes when I’m playing... there are people that dance whatever they want. Then me too, I will play whatever I want... but if you dance according to the rhythm, I will play [what you dance]. (K. Thiam interview 23 May 2006).

Sabar dances at social dance events typically consist of very short (10–20 seconds) improvised solos that combine a few movement patterns to a sequence. In the first video excerpt [DVD video clip 1] you can see women dancing to the *ceebujën* rhythm⁵ at a wedding celebration.⁶ The same movement patterns that are seen here can be used for several *sabar* dance rhythms, but there also some that are specific to a single dance rhythm. A lot of individual variation can be seen in the execution of the established movement patterns; what is essential is the rhythmic accuracy of the dance movements, which enables the choreo-musical communication with the drummers. The role of

⁵ *Ceebujën* (lit. rice with fish, a very common dish eaten at lunchtime) is the most popular of the *sabar* dance rhythms: despite the fast tempo it has been the rhythm most eagerly danced to by women in most of the *sabar* events I have attended since 2000. All movement patterns that are commonly used for *ceebujën* can also be used in other dance rhythms, and therefore it is also the dance that best demonstrates the structures and style of *sabar* dancing. For more information on the rhythm and the most common movement patterns, see Seye 2014: 60–64.

⁶ All video clips included on the accompanying DVD are excerpts of field recordings made by the author.

the *gèwël* drummers at *sabar* events is primarily to serve the participants by creating the framework for a pleasurable social dance event, but, as the guardians of the *sabar* tradition, they also act as referees at *sabar* events in that they ensure that the event proceeds according to custom and maintain order in many subtle ways. The group leader gives musical signals to begin and end the event, as well as to change from one rhythm to another. He might also stop the music for a moment, if there are too many people dancing at the same time. Also, the continuous musical feedback to dancers is essential: a dancer who dances out of rhythm or with unclear movements will most likely be ignored by the solo drummer and anyone taking too much time for her dance solo may be prompted with a musical signal to stop. The apparent leadership and liberty that *sabar* dancing offers to women is thus always kept in check by the male *gèwël* drummers.

Another dimension of interaction in *sabar* dancing is the dialogue among the participants. There is verbal commentary from the audience, mostly in the form of approving exclamations in support of a particular dancer's solo, but for a large part this social conversation takes place through dancing and other non-verbal gestures. Social relationships between the participants become embodied in the way their dance solos follow one another: friends encourage each other to dance and sometimes dance face-to-face reflecting each other's movements, whereas rivals may attempt to break each other's solos by trying to catch the attention of the solo drummer before the other is finished with her solo.

Sabar dance events are thus multifaceted situations where women can performatively construct their female identities and their relationships to each other, as well as demonstrate their knowledge of the social norms of appropriate behavior particular to the given situation, but especially in more private settings they can also playfully contest the everyday norms of appropriate behavior and even share their sexual knowledge and experiences with other women. The latter is central to all-female *tuur* but to a lesser extent also part of smaller *sabar* dance events, especially near the end of the event when the *lëmbël* dance rhythm is played. Unlike other *sabar* dances, the *lëmbël* dance concentrates on the movements of the hips and buttocks.⁷ The bigger and more public the dance event, the less eager women usually are to dance the *lëmbël* due to its sexual connotations.

Although *sabar* dance events are spaces dominated by women, men can be seen dancing at *sabar* relatively often; but, as mentioned earlier, these men are in most cases professional performers: Even in the more private settings one of the drummers might step into the dance space and do a comical solo to lighten up the mood and encourage dancing. Apart from the *gèwël* drummers, the male dancers seen at *sabar* events are nearly always members of ballets and/or smaller dance groups that perform with *mbalax* bands.

⁷ For an explanation of the structure of dance events and for descriptions of the most common *sabar* dances, see Seye 2014: 57 onwards.

When asking about the history of *sabar* dancing, most people state simply that men do not dance, and a man who likes to dance easily gains the reputation of being a homosexual (see also Castaldi 2006: 81):⁸

Even before, when men dance, people see it in very bad eyes... because of tradition... usually when men dance, people think that he is a homosexual. (M. Ndiaye interview 1 March 2006).

However, there are also contradicting views on this matter among the people I interviewed. Some, like Ousmane Ndior (interview 9 March 2006), the teacher of traditional dances at the Ecole National des Arts and a former dancer of the National Ballet, just mentioned specific dance rhythms that were danced by men in the past; but Massamba Gueye (interview 21 April 2006), a writer and expert of Wolof oral traditions, stated explicitly that men and women danced equally in the past and that the situation has changed mainly because of the adoption of Islam by the Wolof people, but partly also due to Western influences. According to my observations at *sabar* events and ballet performances, some dance rhythms are more tightly associated with women than others, which gives further reason to believe that *sabar* dancing has never categorically been a female tradition.

***Sabar* dances as national heritage**

From the early 1960s onwards, possibly earlier, *sabar* dances have been transmitted also as a stage art by folkloric dance companies or 'ballets', as they are called in Francophone West Africa.⁹ The National Ballet of Senegal or *Ballet National du Sénégal* "*La Linguère*" (the official name of the company) was founded in 1961 as an initiative of then President Léopold Sédar Senghor who wanted it to serve as Senegal's cultural ambassador across the world (Castaldi 2006: 9). Since then, numerous other dance companies have been founded all over the country, most of them modeled on the National Ballet and other major West African ballets. Today, these ballets serve as an educational institution for dance. Each ballet trains its own dancers, although the training typically includes simply practicing the choreographies in the ballet's repertoire. Aspiring dancers typically start out in local ballets and hope to develop their skills so as to be accepted to the more valued companies and ultimately to the few professional companies such as the National Ballet. Another motivational factor for dancers is the opportunity to travel. Apart from the prestige of having performed abroad, tours are seen by many as an opportunity to emigrate. All ballets, even the National Ballet, has lost members

⁸ This interestingly corresponds to the attitudes towards male dancers in the early 20th century theatre dance in the US (Burt 2003: 99) and probably also elsewhere in the Western world.

⁹ The first Senegalese ballet according to literature is *Les Ballets d'Afrique Noire*, a private ballet founded in 1957 (Castaldi 2006: 185), more widely known as Ballet Mansour Guèye after its founder. It has, however, been mostly performing dances of the Mande ethnic traditions, widespread in West Africa but in the minority in Senegal.

when touring abroad when dancers and musicians have decided to stay on and pursue their careers elsewhere instead of returning to Senegal.

In ballet performances, *sabar* dancing is often presented alongside other ethnic dance traditions as a national heritage.¹⁰ Many Senegalese ballets follow the pattern set by the National Ballet in adapting dances from several ethnic traditions to their performances. The different dance traditions are usually presented separately, with each scene based on the dances of only one ethnic group. Typical of performances by Senegalese ballets is the emphasis on group choreographies that include both male and female dancers. In the second video example [DVD video clip 2] you can see an excerpt of the National Ballet's *sabar* scene, which went on for 15 minutes.¹¹ Following the custom of traditional dance events to a certain extent, men and women mostly dance separately on stage; either certain dances are performed by men or women only, or men and women form distinct sections within the group choreography.



Figure 1. Ballet Sinomew performing at Centre Culturel Blaise Senghor, Dakar, January 2016.
Photo by Elina Seye.

In ballet performances a “truthful” representation of tradition is generally emphasized instead of the individual creativity of the choreographer (Castaldi 2006: 63, 155). What this means in practice is that the different *sabar* rhythms are easily recognizable and the choreographies make use of the same movement materials one would find performed/observe at *sabar* dance events. Yet, the staged representations of *sabar* dances inevitably differ from the same dance as danced in its original context as follows: the setting of a theater stage is fundamentally different to *sabar* dance events where the line between the performers and audience is blurred and the focus is on social

¹⁰ The idea of national heritage is obviously as problematic in the Senegalese context as elsewhere in Africa (see Castaldi 2006: 2, 203).

¹¹ The excerpt starts with the *baarambay* rhythm, followed by a very short section of *yaaba* as a transition into *ndëtt*.

interaction rather than the representation of the *sabar* tradition; also, presentation of *sabar* dances as part of national heritage marks a difference in relation to how the dancing is publicly represented—as entertainment directed mainly at (young) women. The *sabar* dance events that I have described above are frequently called “street *sabar*” to distinguish them from ballet performances that appear to be widely regarded as the actual *sabar* tradition and a part of the idealized multi-ethnic Senegalese dance heritage to be protected and preserved (see also Agawu 2003: 19). One could conclude that *sabar* of ballets and that of social dance events constitute “parallel traditions” that are developing independently despite common origins (Shay 2002:17, see also Charry 2000b), but my research shows that they also continue to influence one another.

The *sabar* of ballet performances

The group choreographies of ballet performances are most obviously different when comparing the *sabar* dancing of ballets to that of social dancing at *sabar* events. Group choreographies are preplanned and rehearsed, and they consist of synchronized movements of the whole group or of different sections of dancers. This effectively prevents the kind of interaction between dancers and musicians that is essential to the improvised solo-dancing characteristic of *sabar* events. The solo drummer also plays out the movements of the dancers in ballet performances, but instead of the dancers taking the lead and the solo drummer having to anticipate their movements, more often it is the lead drummer who gives the dancers signals or “calls” (the French word *appel* is used), so that all dancers change to the next movement sequence simultaneously. Alternatively, the choreography as well as the accompaniment may be designed in a manner that no such signals are needed. Stage choreographies are also much longer and more complicated than the average dance solos at *sabar* events. Therefore, even an experienced *sabar* drummer would not be able to follow the whole choreography musically without rehearsals.

Solos highlighting the individual style of each dancer are commonly included in ballet performances, but it is quite difficult to estimate if, or to what degree, they are improvised. Typically, these solos are set in a way that resembles the setting of *sabar* dance events: One dancer at a time will dance in the center of the stage while the rest of the group stands in a semicircle formation behind the solo dancer or along the sides of the stage repeating a simple step continuously. The solo drummer will step forward with his drum to follow the dancer more closely, thus emphasizing the connection between the music and the movement, but the solo dancer faces the audience more often than the drummer. The setting both implies and enables improvisation, but because the dancers and drummers of a ballet practice together regularly, they are very familiar with each other's individual styles and repertoires, and therefore know what to expect of each other in terms of movements or musical responses. Furthermore, the dancers tend to hold on to their trademark solo phrases or even entire solos that they have developed during rehearsals instead of attempting something new. Consequently, these solos rarely include the social dimension that solos at recreational *sabar* events

normally have. They focus more on the display of each dancer's skills rather than embodying relationships between dancers and/or dancers and drummers.

Women and men dance the *sabar* dances with the same basic movements, with only minor differences in style. Men generally emphasize force and execute the movements in a more straightforward manner than the women. Women often strive at gracefulness with somewhat lighter and rounded movements. Women also use their hips more than men, adding in this manner a distinct female character to the common steps. (See also Bizas 2014: 32–33). In other contexts, the solos danced by men very often have a humorous nature. The dancer might for example parody female styles of dancing, but this kind of humor is absent from stage performances. Drawing on tradition and common conceptions, certain *sabar* dance rhythms are exclusively or primarily danced by women. The most exclusively female rhythm is *lëmbël*, mentioned above. Most other rhythms might be used for a choreography for both male and female dancers, but choreographers tend to use male dancers more for sections using dance rhythms that are perceived as the least feminine such as *ndëtt*¹² and *baarambay*.¹³

The last difference between recreational *sabar* dancing and ballet performances that I want to mention here is maybe self-evident: ballet dancers are trained professionals. Most people learn *sabar* dancing informally by observing and mimicking other people's dancing simply by living in a Wolof environment where this tradition is an integral part of most celebrations. There is no traditional educational system for dance like the musical apprenticeship that takes place within the *gëwël* families (see Tang 2007: 90–91), although *gëwël* women often claim to be the best dancers (Tang 2007: 128) and children of *gëwël* families are generally encouraged to dance whereas other children may be discouraged. Besides the general exposure to *sabar* dancing that is part of everyday life, ballet dancers enjoy some sort of a formal education in dance, usually an apprenticeship in one or several ballets,¹⁴ where they become familiar with the dances of different ethnic groups and learn to dance as part of a group, executing their dance movements according to the wishes of the choreographer and in unison with other dancers. Synchronized group choreographies push the dancers towards a standardized execution of movements quite unlike the highly individual styles of non-professional dancers. Furthermore, ballet dancers of course rehearse regularly. All these factors enhance their dancing skills and give them a keener awareness of their own dancing.

Due to regular rehearsals, professional dancers are usually physically stronger and more flexible, which enables them to dance with larger and faster movements as well as with a wider dynamic range than other dancers. Therefore, ballet dancers performing a solo at a *sabar* event are quite easily recognizable by their movement qualities, and often

¹² The name of this rhythm can also be written *ndëc*, reflecting differences in pronunciation, and it is also known as *kaolack* after the city where it is said to have originated.

¹³ For more information on particular dance rhythms and their history, see Tang 2007: 104–112; Seye 2014: 57–70.

¹⁴ The *Ecole Nationale des Arts* (National School of the Arts) in Dakar also offers a program in dance, but traditional dances are only a small part of the curriculum there (O. Ndior interview 9 March 2006).

also by the structures of their solos: non-professional dancers tend to choose the most typical movements of each dance rhythm for their solos and combine them in an easily predictable way, whereas professional dancers use a wider range of movement materials and are able to combine these movements in a variety of ways without dancing out of rhythm. Not surprisingly, their solos are often longer than those of non-professional dancers.

***Sabar* dancing in the context of pop music**

A somewhat newer development is dancing connected with the most popular genre of Senegalese pop music, the *mbalax*, which traces its beginnings to the late 1970s.¹⁵ Today, the term *mbalax* is sometimes used to embrace all kinds of Senegalese pop music, although originally it refers to a specific genre that was created by transforming the different patterns of the *sabar* drum ensemble to the modern electric instruments of a pop band. Typically, only the basic accompaniment pattern, known as *mbalax*, was still played on a *sabar* drum, and this gave the genre its current name (Tang 2007: 155). Until today, *mbalax* music draws heavily on *sabar* drumming, although it is also influenced by international pop genres. The dancing associated with *mbalax* music similarly reveals a strong connection with *sabar* dancing. Movements and movement sequences of traditional *sabar* dances are used as such and form the basis for new creations and variations, although there are also occasional influences from various other sources, both from other Senegalese dance traditions and from different popular dance styles of African and African-American origin.

Whether the dancing in pop music contexts is a continuum of the *sabar* tradition or not is a question that would warrant a more detailed historical analysis that I am able to provide here. From my observations and experiences of these dances since the year 2000, however, I am inclined to agree with Yama Wade (interview 9 April 2011), an experienced Paris-based dancer and *sabar* dance teacher, who stated emphatically that “there is no *mbalax* in dance.” According to her, the dancing done to *mbalax* music is still *sabar*. The most important grounds for this view, besides the use of traditional movement materials as well as the musical association between *sabar* and *mbalax*, is that many professional dancers perform both in ballets and on stage with *mbalax* bands. Furthermore, the dance sequences from popular *mbalax* video clips are adopted periodically to the dance repertoire of *sabar* events, where they are danced by non-professionals. If one looks at how the audience at nightclubs and concerts dances to *mbalax* music, the difference from *sabar* dancing is more obvious, but my focus here is on professional dancers.

The dance performances on music video clips and in concerts of *mbalax* bands differ from social *sabar* dancing in largely the same way that ballet performances do: they are typically carefully planned group choreographies performed by both male and

¹⁵ For a history of the *mbalax* and a concise explanation of its musical structures, see Tang 2007: 154–159. A more thorough investigation of the early development of the *mbalax* genre is available in German in Brunner 2010.

female dancers. *Mbalax* dance groups are typically organized around a leader, a star dancer, who takes the main responsibility for the choreographies as well as for practical issues such as seeking opportunities to perform, negotiating performance fees, etc. Famous groups may also have a separate manager. Often there is a small core group of dancers, but in addition, there are other dancers who know the choreographies and can be called to perform if necessary. Groups of male dancers dominated the *mbalax* music scene until the early 2000s (see Castaldi 2006: 85, Tang 2007: 177), but since then there have also been famous all-female dance groups, such as the rivaling Les Amazones and Les Gazelles in Dakar. Mixed groups have been rare until recent years, but music videos quite often already included both male and female dancers earlier.¹⁶

In some ways the dancing associated with *mbalax* music is actually closer to social *sabar* dancing than ballet performances. In the case of video clips, the music is prerecorded, and therefore it sets limits to the choreography; however, the structures of the *mbalax* pieces encourage short outbursts of movement similar to improvised *sabar* dance solos during the instrumental phrases, alternating with more static repetitions of simpler steps during the sung verses. In *mbalax* concerts, the dancers usually perform the same choreographies that the audience knows from video clips, but they will also dance to other pieces that the band plays, often with less well-planned choreographies. It is also not uncommon to see dancers perform improvised solos with the accompaniment of the *mbalax* band's percussionists. Especially at small clubs, even the audience may be given the possibility to dance improvised solos like they would at a *sabar* event, albeit for a limited time.

In concerts, *mbalax* music is frequently even more percussive and thereby closer to traditional *sabar* drumming than on video clips. The percussionists are given plenty of time for soloing as well as for "animation", addressing and entertaining the audience verbally. The *sabar* drummer of a *mbalax* band¹⁷ frequently assumes a role similar to the leader of the drum ensemble at *sabar* events, where he not only leads the music but also functions as the *animateur* (master of ceremonies), urging the participants to dance and keeping up a festive mood with comical exclamations, physical gestures and rhythmical allusions. Similarly, the *animateur* in a *mbalax* concert will address the audience with rhythmic and/or spoken phrases, instruct them to raise or clap their hands or join in dancing the latest "hit dance", a short movement sequence connected to distinctive rhythmic phrases and sometimes including a rhythmically declaimed text that is either humorous or verbally prompts the movements, sometimes both simultaneously (see Castaldi 2006: 135–139).

¹⁶ As an example of dancing to *mbalax* music, see e.g. the music video clip to singer Mapenda Seck's song *Barça wala* (2006) on YouTube: https://youtu.be/Z_1qvalB8kg. The choreographer and leader of the dance group performing on the clip is Pape Moussa Sonko, the solo dancer in the clip. Apart from his own dance group, he is a dancer in the National Ballet. His dancing can be seen also in video clips 2 and 3 that illustrate this article. You can easily find other examples of *mbalax* videos and live performances on YouTube.

¹⁷ Many *sabar* drummers of *mbalax* bands also perform regularly at *sabar* events as members of drum ensembles.

Many of these “hit dances” can be described with the Wolof term *bàkk*, which in the context of *sabar* drumming refers to fixed musical phrases that have been created on the basis of spoken phrases and thus have a verbal content, but in recent years it has become increasingly common to create new *bàkk* as purely musical compositions as well as on the basis of specific dance sequences.¹⁸ The humorous and sometimes suggestive rhythmical texts, on the other hand, are usually recognizable as *taasu*, a traditional genre of spoken poetry traditionally performed by women in *sabar* events (see Heath 1994: 88, 97–98). However, in the context of *mbalax* music, *taasu* is often performed by men. Salam Diallo and Pape Ndiaye Thiopet are the most famous examples of male *mbalax* artists, who have built their whole career on adaptations of this verbal genre and who clearly aim at launching a new hit dance with practically every video clip they make.

Thus, although dancing on *mbalax* video clips is in many ways comparable to ballet performances, the dance performances of professionals in *mbalax* concerts often bear more similarities to improvised dancing at *sabar* events than ballet performances, which attempt to represent the *sabar* tradition ‘truthfully.’ Despite the similarities, one must remember that the focus in *mbalax* concerts is still on the music performed by the band and most of the dancing is either collective (by the audience) or performed on stage by professional dancers to add a visual dimension to the musical performance, whereas at *sabar* events the music primarily serves the dancing.

Professional dancers at *sabar* events

Many professional dancers performing in the *mbalax* scene are or have been members of Senegalese ballets. Furthermore, most of them also attend *sabar* dance events with the members of their dance groups as performers rather than simply as participants. It has become customary to invite professional dancers to perform for big *tànnëbéer* (nighttime *sabar* events), with the organizer/s paying for their appearance. These dancers, when recognized by the audience as someone they have seen on a music video or on stage, may also receive money from participants as a token of appreciation.

This custom of tipping sets professional performers apart from other participants. *Géwël* musicians are, due to their particular social status, in the position to expect gifts from the people they perform for; and at all *sabar* events, the drumming is cut at some point for *woyaan*, praising the audience members with the intention of collecting money from them (see e.g. Tang 2007: 133–134; Seye 2014: 88–89). When directly addressed by the drummers most people feel obliged to reward them, but audience members may also tip performers spontaneously at any point of the event. Thus, dancers recognized as professionals are seen as part of the same social category as the *géwël* drummers. Although non-professionals might dance well too, their solos are usually not rewarded with money, but rather just cheers and other kinds of gestures expressing the appreciation of the other participants.

¹⁸ For more information on *bàkk*, how they are created and transformed in different contexts, see Tang 2008 and 2007: 112–124.

Large *sabar* events always attract performers, especially dancers but also singers, as situations where money and fame can be earned by performing, even when they are not invited by the organizer/s. Professional dancers often also perform group choreographies at *sabar* events, most often sequences they have already performed in a music video or a variation of such choreography, but dance groups also create new choreographies specifically for such occasions. A choreography by Pape Moussa Sonko, performed by himself and his all-male dance group can be seen on the DVD video clip 3.¹⁹ I saw the group perform the same choreography in several *tànnëbéér* in Dakar in late 2005 and early 2006, and the flashy, acrobatic style was soon imitated by other groups of male dancers. As in this example, a group choreography is often preceded by improvised solos that give the dancers of the group a chance to display individual skills and that catch the audience's attention before the highlight of the group's performance. The most famous dancers, the leaders of their own dance groups, however, do not necessarily perform a solo at all, even if everyone else does; especially certain female dancers have the habit of letting the members of their group enter first with their solos after which they themselves simply walk into the dance space in flamboyant style, wait for an ovation from the audience and then signal the start of the group choreography to the other dancers.

Female dancers can blend into the predominantly female crowd and occasionally engage in the social interaction of a *sabar* event in a manner quite similar to the rest of the participants, if they wish to do so, but their male counterparts are highly visible and often stay at the event only for the duration of their own performance. Dancers and dance groups that have already gained some fame rarely stay at a *sabar* event from beginning to end (unless the event is organized by a personal friend); rather they try to arrive at a point when the dancing is already in full swing, and stay behind the other participants until they feel that the time is right to make their entrance into the dance space. This means that the usual social dynamics of the *sabar* event is cut by such performances, and although the performances of recognized dancers are generally met with enthusiasm, they are sometimes also criticized for taking too much time from the social dancing open to everyone.

What also sets such dance performances at *sabar* events apart from the usual soloing is that professional dancers commonly dance facing the majority of the crowd instead of facing the drummers (and turning their backs to most of the spectators), as dancers at *sabar* events usually do. This emphasizes their role as professional performers used to performing on stage, as well as their own awareness of such a role. Many dance groups even bring their own drummers along, or one musician who will lead the *sabar* ensemble present at the event so that they can have the musical accompaniment to their choreography exactly as planned. If the dancers do not have their trusted drummers with them, they may sing the rhythmic phrases (or *bàkk*) that they need for their accompaniment to the leader of the drum ensemble before performing their choreography.

¹⁹ The rhythm here is *fass*, see Seye 2014: 69.

Apart from the above-mentioned characteristics that make the performances of professional dancers stand out from the improvised social dancing typical of *sabar* events, there are also certain differences as to what and how they dance. Some differences in the structures and style of solos by professional dancers were mentioned above when discussing ballet performances. In addition to the more varied structures, a wider range of dynamics and very clearly executed movements, both the solos and choreographies of trained professionals frequently incorporate elements that are actually foreign to the *sabar* tradition. Typical new additions to the movement repertoire are acrobatic elements, such as somersaults that are usually performed by men, as seen in video clip 3, whereas women might rather add rolls and splits. It is also common to borrow movements from other ethnic dance traditions, especially from “djembe dances” that have been introduced into the repertoires of Senegalese ballets mainly by Guinean dancers and choreographers (see e.g. Bizas 2014: 23–24). Such mixing of different movement materials is sometimes frowned upon by older professionals as expressed to me by Ousmane Ndior:

I am not against the use of traditional dances in modern music [i.e. pop music] but the traditional rhythms and dances [of different ethnic groups] should not be mixed. Acrobatics has traditionally been part only of the dances of *tukuleur* and *pulaar* men in Senegal, but nowadays many young dancers include it also in other dances. (O. Ndior interview 9 March 2006).

In recent years, several well-known artists and groups, both star dancers and *sabar* drum ensembles, have taken the habit of organizing yearly “anniversary” *tànnëbéers* (the French word *anniversaire* is used, although the event does not necessarily fall on a real anniversary or birthday). Other artists are invited as guests and still many more come, hoping to further their careers by presenting their skills to a crowd full of professionals. The more famous the organizer/s, the less time there will be for social dancing, with one group after another stepping into the middle to present their best choreographies. At such events, the social aspect of a traditional *sabar* event easily becomes transformed into a kind of a dance competition, with rival dancers and dance groups competing for the time and space for their performance and then trying to outdo the previous group and impress the spectators. Playful competitiveness is a common feature of other *sabar* events as well, but here the competition sometimes gets very serious: to professional dancers the competition is after all about their livelihood and future career.

A similar type of serious competition among professional dancers often manifests itself at *soirées sénégalaises*, which can be described in short as a *tànnëbéer* held in a nightclub (see Tang 2007: 152–153). *Soirées sénégalaises* attract dancers and dance groups to come and present their newest choreographies. In some cases dance groups are hired by the organizers to perform, or the *sabar* ensemble hired to play at the *soirée* may be asked to bring some dancers along with them to animate the evening. The *soirées sénégalaises* as well as the *anniversaires* of professional artists can be categorized as *sabar* events because of the way they are organized and because they more or less follow the usual structure of a *sabar* event. However, they both include many elements more reminiscent of stage dance, especially the synchronized group choreographies

and the habit of turning to face the spectators, as well as the different tricks and devices used to stand out and impress audiences. These traits have been further encouraged in recent years through media: some major Senegalese TV stations have started to film big *tànnëbéer*, especially those organized by celebrities, for their weekend entertainment shows that also include footage from nightclubs and concerts of local pop stars.

Expressing masculinity within a female tradition

I have discussed above the social dancing at *sabar* events in relation to performances by professional dancers in more modern contexts, on stage and in media formats, such as music videos and TV entertainment shows. I see the new professional forms of *sabar* dancing discussed as part of the *sabar* tradition because of the many ways they influence the social dancing by amateurs at *sabar* events. It is striking that men have gained such a visible role within a dance tradition that is until today commonly conceptualized as essentially female. Some of the people I interviewed even expressed the opinion that nowadays men dance *sabar* better than women (see also Morales-Libove 2005: 134), although what constitutes “better” is not clearly verbalized.

Nowadays, if there is a *sabar*, a *tànnëbéer*, you can see as many men as women [dancing]. It was not like that before. Now the men dance... one can even say that the men dance very well, even better than the women. (P.M. Sonko interview 2 May 2006).

The notable presence of male *sabar* dancers is connected with the comparatively new phenomenon of dance as a profession. Since dance has become a realistic option for earning a living, it has become more and more attractive to men. Furthermore, the opportunity to travel abroad on tour with a ballet or a *mbalax* band has brought dance as a professional activity new prestige. Being a professional dancer, just like being a professional musician, actually appears to be more acceptable to young men than young women, because the work involves performing late at night in diverse locations and the implications this brings with it.

Some well-known female dancers have been rumored to practice prostitution or to appear in pornographic films (see e.g. Boy Town 2007; Xibar.net 2013) while the decency of many others has been called into question with less serious accusations. The most public case was the “Goudi Town” scandal in 2007, when the famous dancer called Ndèye Gueye along with two other dancers were arrested with charges of public indecency after a video of them dancing *lëmbël* at a night club in Dakar was published on the internet. The three European organizers of the filmed event (which took place in 2005) also received a sentence. This case has been repeatedly mentioned and discussed in Senegalese media over the years (see e.g. DakarPrivee 2015, where other cases are also mentioned)²⁰, but the morality of dancing in general and the *lëmbël* dance in particular is also a recurring topic in both everyday discussions and in Senegalese media (see e.g. Lo 2014; Baldé 2010).

²⁰ The case is also mentioned by Bizas (2014: 95–96) and Neveu Kringelbach (2013: 112–113).

Although the appropriateness of dancing is an issue for women even if they are trained professionals, the status of a professional dancer clearly makes all the difference for men. As mentioned earlier, men eager to participate in *sabar* events are easily tagged as homosexuals, but performing the same dances as a professional artist does not seem to call into question masculinity or heterosexuality, let alone the morality of the man (see also Castaldi 2006: 168–170). The changes that have been initiated by the various adaptations of *sabar* dances into stage performances have become tools for male dancers to gain access into and even reach a dominant position in *sabar* “circles”.

Burt (2003: 14) states in his discussion of Western theater dance in the 20th century that “men have continually needed to adjust and redefine the meanings attributed to sexual difference in order to maintain dominance in the face of changing social circumstances.” Similarly, male dancers in Senegal have needed to redefine the meanings related to *sabar* dancing by carefully choosing what and how to dance in order to construct their dancing as masculine. The above-mentioned straightforward and sharply accentuated style of professional male dancers on stage is of course clearly visible also when they perform at *sabar* events. This emphasis on force, underscored by acrobatics or at least nearly acrobatic jumps and turns, is the primary means of performing masculinity in *sabar* dancing, obviously based on the notion of men as the physically stronger sex, points to a performative expression of power, of male dominance in society. If a man would dance just for the fun of dancing, without impressing the spectators with physical prowess and originality, he would very likely be perceived as feminine, implying homosexuality. Also the aspect of showing solidarity or friendship towards others through dancing, quite typical of women’s dancing, is completely absent from the solos by male dancers.

Another solution employed by male dancers to emphasize the masculinity within the feminine circles of *sabar* dancing, is the careful choice of rhythms, especially when they perform at *sabar* events. Male dancers avoid dancing to the rhythms most tightly associated with women, especially *farwujar* and *lëmbël*, and to some extent even *ceebujën*, the most popular of all *sabar* dance rhythms. Instead, they rather choose other rhythms, such as *baarambay* and *ndëtt*, which are similarly part of the standard repertoire of *sabar* dance events, but less exclusively associated with women. Apart from the *lëmbël* dance with its focus on the movements of the hips and buttocks, there are no obvious differences in the movement materials to distinguish “female” dance rhythms from “male” or gender-neutral ones, but the variety of established dance movements for *baarambay* and *ndëtt* is wider than for most other *sabar* dance rhythms, providing thus more movement materials to choose from. Furthermore, *ndëtt* is the most common basis for *bàkk*, fixed rhythmic sequences that may have a verbal content but are also increasingly created as accompaniment for new choreographic creations. The dance rhythms favored by male dancers are also somewhat slower compared to those that they avoid, and therefore allow even larger movements as well as more variation in dynamics.

Male dance groups have additionally taken up rhythms from outside the standard dance repertoire, such as *fass*, a rhythm originally played at local wrestling matches (*làmb*),²¹ which in contrast to *sabar* events are primarily attended by men. The *fass* rhythm is quite similar to *ndëtt* but the movements employed for this rhythm in a *sabar* context have mainly been adapted from *baarambay*, but most people are aware of the rhythm's original association with wrestling. In addition, there are new creations such as a fast dance rhythm called *musicale*, which is an adaptation of *mbalax* music on *sabar* drums: in Wolof language, pop music such as *mbalax* is commonly referred to with the French word *musique*, of which *musicale* is a derivative. The style of dancing to *musicale* is usually quite distinct, characterized by sequences where established movement patterns are used but commonly cut short and interspersed with irregular steps that shift from the beat to offbeat and back again. Both *fass* and *musicale* were still in 2006 danced exclusively by men, but have since been taken up by female dancers as well.

Similarly, traits that I have above listed as masculine ones are being adopted by women too: especially the 'male' emphasis on force appears to be becoming characteristic of all *sabar* dances. To further underscore the strong accents as well as the overall virtuosity of the dancers, speed is also being emphasized. Older musicians and dancers complain about all dance rhythms being played too fast these days and the dances, consequently, lacking in grace and clarity (O. Ndior interview 9 March 2006, O. Sene interview 23 March 2006). There are also complaints about young dancers "running" on the rhythm, dancing faster than the tempo provided by the drummers (Y. Wade interview 9 April 2011). Younger people, by contrast, seem to appreciate fast movements and strong accents in the dance, as well as displays of extraordinary skills, such as acrobatics. Although some differences between the male and female dancing styles still remain, it seems that the qualities previously associated with male dancing are slowly becoming aesthetic norms for *sabar* dancing in general.

Conclusion

The increase in the participation of male dancers in the *sabar*, coupled with the general process of the professionalization of dancing, has brought new prestige to the *sabar* tradition, but at the same time it is promoting developments that may change some of the central qualities of the *sabar* tradition. The social conversation and collective construction of the dance event through improvised dance solos, which have been essential characteristics of *sabar* events, are now partly being replaced by pre-arranged expert performances. Still, these performances are often seen as the highlights of *sabar* events. This has repercussions both on the aesthetics of *sabar* dancing and on the social dynamics of *sabar* events. The individuality of the dance style may gradually become displaced by a style of *sabar* dancing that is "standardized" due to the training of professional dancers that aims at performing synchronized group choreographies—

²¹ The name *fass* refers to the Fass neighborhood in Dakar and the wrestling team based there.

or alternatively, virtuosic dance solos that emphasize special skills not everyone will be able to develop.

The expression of social relationships through dance is increasingly being replaced by displays of virtuosity at *sabar* events, which may discourage less refined dance expressions and ultimately even rob women of the social setting that has provided a safe space to performatively construct their own feminine identities in interaction with other women. The *sabar* tradition that professional male dancers construct is much more rigid and oriented towards performing extraordinary skills and physical prowess to an audience, and men normally do not participate in the playful interactions characteristic of social *sabar* dancing. Interactions between professional dancers are characterized more by competition than by gestures of solidarity, and therefore also solos aim at a flashy presentation of skills and style rather than connecting to the expressions of preceding dancers.

The changes brought about by the adaptation of *sabar* dances and rhythms to stage performances illustrate both of the two opposing tendencies that Kofi Agawu (2003: 17) has observed in the styles of traditional music in post-independence Africa: transformation and consolidation. Transformation is most obvious in the dancing related to *mbalax* music that uses a broad range of influences, but also in the adoption and creation of new rhythms into the *sabar* repertoire in order to emphasize the masculinity of the dancers. Consolidation and redefinition of tradition is most visible in the group choreographies of ballets, which give space to both male and female dancers. The participation of male dancers underlines the high status of stage art in contrast to the low status of entertainment offered by the primarily feminine “street *sabar*”, social dance events. Both of these developments contribute to the current trend where qualities initially considered masculine are slowly becoming standards for good *sabar* dancing.

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